Friends to the End

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Four kids dared to do what others feared to try. Together they will learn, grow, and reach for the stars. They will make a difference everywhere they go and teach others valuable lessons, but first they have to make it home before bedtime. Kid/Friends AU.

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Introduction
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6

Chapter 1

The universe is a vast place, filled with stars and planets that many creatures called home. Almost anywhere one travels there will be planets that house different species together, with one race standing dominant above all else. But on the rare occasions there will be a planet suitable to sustain a diversity of species, of which would never be seen together, let alone be able to co-exist with their environmental needs clashing head to head. These planets are a rare gem that travelers consider an honor to visit, and an unforgettable experience. With so many different cultures and faces all mixed in one, a single visit is a year's worth of travel. On these planets there is no higher race, no dominant. Every species is equal, even when many fail to admit it.

On one of these planets our story begins, a story of friendship, trust and sacrifice. A story that proves love is the strongest magic around and nothing is impossible if you work and stick together.

On the far side of the universe, past asteroid fields and black holes, rested the small planet of Culturn. Culturn is one of the few planets spread around the galaxy that was considered multiraced, able to house a number of species in one. This particular planet was made up of families who already had roots, with the remaining percentage made up of the occasional refugee and traveling folk who want to start a new.

Some parts of the planet divided into sections, creating neighboring villages that refused to communicate unless absolutely necessary. One of these sections stood out from the rest, changing the environment so drastically it created a village that could house a variety of species so opposite to each other that it was a miracle they managed to co-exist.

This village was made up of many diverse citizens, but they all had made a silent agreement to only socialize with their own. For years

this continued, not a single soul daring to break the functioning chain. That was until four children decided to ignore the agreement and re-write their own.

Wander stared curiously outside his window, or as much as he could outside his window. His seven year old body was not made for grownup windows, but what he lacked in height he made up for in willpower.

Today wasn't anything special, just another day passing like the others with nothing interesting. The only difference was instead of him running around outside he was kneeling on the top of his couch gazing out the window.

A pair of footsteps creaked along the wooden floor as a tall figure entered the room and looked at the sadden child. "Wander? Honey, why aren't you playing outside?"

Wander tore his eyes away from the window to look at his mother. Her soft, peach colored fur shining against the sun's rays entering from the outside. Her onyx eyes stared lovingly at him with a hint of concern.

Wander looked back at the window and put his head down. "No one to play with."

His mother walked over to the couch. "That's not true, why don't you go and play with the other Nomad kids?" She asked as she sat down.

Wander slid down from the top and landed right next to her. "They don't want to play with me. They say I do too much. I'm too eno-enorgetik."

"Energetic, dear, and who says being too energetic is a bad thing? You're a child, of course you'll have bundles of energy, right?" She said as she attacked him with a hug and caused a mass hysteria of giggles.

When the fun died down a bit she stood up and fixed her fur of wrinkles. Wander looked at her questioningly. "Mama? Will I ever

have friends?"

"Of course you will. One day you will have the most amazing friends in the world, so amazing that those who didn't want to be your friends will be jealous."

"When?"

"I don't know, sweetie that depends on you. They will find you or you will find them. Just be yourself and I'm sure your friends will be waiting."

Wander nodded and put his head down, slightly disappointed with the answer.

"Why don't you go play outside and show them that having too much fun isn't a bad thing? Who knows, maybe your friends are outside just waiting for you to find them. I'll fix up your favorite for dinner, how does that sound?"

Wander jumped with joy. "Can I have the red berries too?"

"Yes you can have the red berries too. Now, off with you, and remember stranger danger."

He nodded eagerly and ran to the door, remembering to put on his sneakers before bolting outside, leaving his mother with an amused and relieved smile. However, once outside and gaining a fair distance from home he started slowing down to a stroll and found himself without a clue on how to start.

He made his way over to the spot where most Nomad kids hang out to play, spotting seven he knew personally without a beat. The seven Nomads were the ones who told Wander to leave them alone, and even after all his attempts at being friends they ignored him without a second glance. It was alright though; they were too slow compared to him. His mama said to be himself and if the Nomad kids can't keep up than they weren't meant to be his friends.

Wander continued walking, passing the spot and going further across the village. He liked exploring around; it gave him new discoveries and new adventures to find. New sights, sounds and

smells always got him excited. There was just so much that he didn't know!

Suddenly he remembered he discovered a pond the other day just outside of the village. A huge pond that he was sure could pass as an ocean. There must be hidden treasure just waiting to be discovered there. Without a moment to waste he ran, using the energy many claimed was too much and made it to the pond in record time. The pond's surface glittered as ripples reflected the sun's rays everywhere.

Just looking at it was amazing and Wander could stay to watch it for hours, but he didn't come for that. Looking to the ground he started to search for anything interesting, making sure to avoid walking too close to the pond's sides. The last thing he wanted was wet shoes and socks and having to explain why he was outside village boundaries.

Before he knew it the sun had passed the straight up point his mom told him meant 'time to come home.' He looked at his discoveries that consisted of three spiral shells, a shiny blue, red, orange and green stone, and a near perfect star shell. Even though it wasn't much Wander felt he was on top of the world. The only problem being his mom couldn't see the shells; otherwise she would know he was outside the village.

He quickly buried the shells again, but couldn't find it in his heart to bury the stones. Deciding on taking them home he placed the stones in-between his palms, somewhat hiding them from view but not completely. As he made his way back home he spotted a group of kids huddled near the center of the village, a group of Zbornak kids to be exact. Wander stopped to stare. He had seen Zbornaks before but never actually talked to them. His mother always said to stay near the Nomads.

Besides just walking together Wander had never seen how Zbornaks interact, what they do for fun or if they are mean or nice. Curiosity won him over and he tried inching closer to the group while keeping from sight behind a corner of a building. He spotted six Zbornak children, five of which were ganging up on a blue one.

"Why are you such a- such a boy!" A pink Zbornak screamed at the blue one.

"Why can't you leave me alone?! I don't like girly things, big deal! I'm not bothering you." The blue one screamed back.

"Because only a loser plays alone. Not even the boys want you near them. You don't want friends?"

"If it means I have to like the things *you* do than no, I don't want friends. I can survive without them."

The pink Zbornak rolled her eyes "Whatever, loser, stay alone for all I care" before turning around and making the other four follow her.

Wander could hear the blue one mumble something to herself before she grunted and abruptly turned around straight at him. He didn't have enough time to pretend he was looking at something else and was caught red handed by her.

"You!" She shouted at him.

"Eeek!" Wander squeaked.

She stomped over to him. "Were you snooping?"

"N-no, mam! I was, uh- I was heading home when you and y-you're friend h-happen to stand by and I-"

"They're **not** my *friends* !" She interrupted him.

"O-of course! I d-didn't know I-" Suddenly Wander bowed down. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to snoop. It's just that I was mighty curious since I hardly ever see Zbornaks outside of- of, and I- I-"

Something he said along the line of the apology must have done the trick because the Zbornak stopped glaring and gave him a curious look. She confessed, she'd never actually talked with a Nomad kid before, are they all this formal? He doesn't look like someone who wants trouble.

"Forget it."

Wander looked at her confused. "Wha-?"

"I said forget it. I don't have time for this, I have to go home." Without a goodbye she turned around and followed the same path taken from the previous group of Zbornaks.

Wander watched her go, feeling extremely guilty for snooping on her conversation. The feeling would bother him for the rest of the day unless he properly apologized, but how? Suddenly he realized the answer was in his hands. He looked down at the stones. *Perfect.*

As quickly as he could he caught up with the Zbornak, who heard him coming and turned with a surprised look on her face.

"I'm sorry for snooping."

"Forget about it."

"No, it wasn't right of me." Wander stood firm and reached out a hand to her. "This is for you."

She looked at the hand before looking back at him. Wander waited patiently until she decided to trust him and cautiously took whatever was in his hand. She opened her palm to see a beautiful, blue stone that glistened as she moved it.

"Please accept this as a gift." When she didn't say anything Wander continued. "I'm Wander."

Finally she looked back from the beautiful stone and saw a huge, genuine smile on the Nomad's face. Was this how all Nomad kids act? Or just this particular one. "Sylvia." She said.

"Sylvia, what a lovely name. I'm sorry again for snooping and hope you can forgive me."

She didn't know how to reply so she just settled with a "Yeah."

"I better head home now; maybe we can see each other again sometime." Wander said as he strutted off back home.

Sylvia watched him go, a smile crawling on her face. "What a

strange kid." She looked back at the stone and had to admit, it was quite beautiful.

Wander arrived home with a smile that wouldn't disappear and a great mood. His mother managed to sense this off the bat and came over to hug him. "Welcome back, anything interesting happened today?"

"I met someone new!" He cheered.

"Oh? Did you make a friend?"

Wander's smile vanished a bit. "I don't know. I didn't ask her if she wanted to be my friend."

Wander and his mother walked together towards the kitchen where she fished out two plates for them both. "Well, sweetheart, usually you don't ask them if they want to be your friend, it just sort of happens. Maybe you can invite her to play with you next time? I'm sure she'll say yes."

"Do you really think so, mama?"

"I'm positive."

The next day Wander couldn't sit still. He was so excited to go outside and find Sylvia, eager to know if she would be his friend, that he didn't realize breakfast had passed and he didn't remember a single thing of it.

"Are you off to see your friend?" His mother gently asked.

"Can I, mama?"

"Of course, be careful alright?"

Wander nodded and ran out the door, running to the center of the village and searching every corner for the blue Zbornak, but as time faded away disappointment started growing. His smile disappeared and his back slouched. He continued his search though, looking

between houses and cabins of the sort.

Finally he looked across one particular path in-between two grand houses and spotted a blue figure, a puffy blue figure with a stubby tail facing him. His smile grew back instantly and he ran across the path, reaching the Zbornak in seconds.

"Sylvia!"

The Zbornak turned her head and sure enough it *was* Sylvia. Wander was standing right behind her at this point and the Zbornak was surprised that he managed to sneak up on her at all.

"Yes?"

"You remember me, right? We met yesterday, I was snooping on you and severely apologized for it, gave you the stone."

"Yeah, I remember you. Kind of hard to forget someone like you."

Wander smiled, taking it as a compliment. "I was wondering, you wanna play with me?" He stretched out a small, orange furred arm at her.

To say a Nomad child asking a Zbornak to play together was shocking was an understatement; the entire thing was a downright unexpected astonishment. Any adult around the area would have had their mouths wide open at the very idea, and they will in the near future because Sylvia did something even Wander didn't expect.

She smiled and happily took the hand. No second thoughts, no questioning his sanity, and no hesitation. "Sure."

Chapter 2

Wander and Sylvia attracted unwanted gazes everywhere they went together. Folk would talk, point and call the whole thing unimaginable. After all, nobody had broken the chain as of yet and all of a sudden these children do?

The two kids were never fazed by it though. Adults could point and talk all they want but as long as they were having fun none of it mattered. Every day they would meet in the center of the village on the mark and go off to explore the many possibilities the village held.

The adults weren't the only ones who talked and pointed. The other Nomad and Zbornak kids did as well. If none of them wanted nothing to do with them before they definitely don't want anything to do with them now. Still, Wander never bat an eyelash to them. He had Sylvia now and Sylvia actually managed to keep up with him!

"Last one to the pond is a rotten egg!" Wander shouted as he raced off towards the outskirts of the village.

"In your dreams!" He heard Sylvia shout behind him, and now the games begin.

He ran as far as his little legs could carry him, and that wasn't much considering his size, but his energetic personality made up for it tenfold.

"You better hurry up because I'm right behind ya!" Sylvia's voice was much closer than he had anticipated. He willed his short legs to move faster but Sylvia's footsteps only got closer and closer and then-

"Whaaaa!"

Wander screeched into a halt. The action was so sudden that it caused Sylvia, who was running right behind him, to crash and knock them both over into a roll across the ground. Wander ended up on his stomach under Sylvia, who was on her back with her

backside on him. None of this fazed him though, and he quickly jumped from under her and started searching for the crying.

"What in the? Wander? What happened?" She asked when she got up and saw him searching around.

"I heard someone." He said and continued the search until "There!" he pointed at a random location in the shadows, obscured by trees and houses. In the shadows a group of Watchpups were circling something, taunting and laughing at it. Wander wasn't a genius but he had a fairly good idea what it *was* they were taunting, or to be precise, *who* .

On that exact moment some of the Watchpups decided to get a better view in the circle and moved apart from each other, giving Wander and Sylvia a perfect hole between the wall of bodies to see exactly who was being bullied. In the center sat a tiny Watchpup, tinier than its attackers, wearing a long, silver shirt that covered its knees. Its eye was closed but tears were evident all over. It rubbed its eye in an attempt to dry them off but only succeeded in smearing it and creating more.

In front of the Watchpup stood another far bigger one who pointed and laughed while holding something up in the air. On closer inspection the item the Watchpup was preventing the other on the ground from reaching was a stuffed little Cyclops bear.

Wander could hear Sylvia grunt. "Those jerks!" He turned to her, asking if they could help without actually saying anything. Sylvia understood loud and clear. "Come on, I think it's time they picked on somebody their own size."

The surrounding Watchpups never stood a chance, let alone knew what hit them. Sylvia charged at them like a maniac and never gave them a chance to retaliate, sending each Watchpup running back home crying. The main pup who appeared to be the leader was so shocked they just stood there frozen in place. Wander took the opportunity to snatch the bear from their hands and walked over to the Watchpup on the ground, who still had their eye closed and didn't realize what was happening around them.

"Hey, are you alright?" Wander placed a hand on his shoulder, making the pup jump in fright and open his eye. Wander made eye contact with a bright red, watery eye that looked to have been crying for some time. "Hi, I'm Wander, what's yours?"

The Watchpup hiccupped, unable to answer. Wander waited patiently until he could while Sylvia handled the last of the bullies. After sometime the pup finally managed a sound. "P-p-pee-pp-pers."

"Peepers?" Wander repeated to make sure. "That's a cute name."

Sylvia walked over to them, slapping her hands together in a job well done manner. "Those creeps won't dare show their face here again."

"Peepers, this is Sylvia." Wander introduced.

She waved at him. "Hey, little eyeball."

Peepers sniffled at the comment. "She doesn't mean it mean, she means it playful." Wander reassured him. "Anyway, is this yours?" He pushed the bear he rescued into view.

The moment the Watchpup spotted the toy he lunged at the bear, gripping it with all his might.

"Why were they picking on you?" Sylvia asked him.

Peepers sniffled even more. "B-becau- b-b-because I-I'm a c-cry b-b-b-baby."

"Aww, that's not true." Wander said. "You're not a cry baby."

"I a-am!"

"Hmm, oh! I got it!" Wander snapped his fingers. "Why don't you come with us? There's plenty of stuff for us to do and you won't have to worry about being a cry baby anymore."

"Hey, why not? We could always use an extra pair of hands." Sylvia agreed.

The pup was hesitant, waiting for a cruel joke to happen, but it never

did. He watched the duo cautiously, or as much as his watery eyes would let him. They didn't look bad like the bullies. They actually looked like they cared.

Wander reached out a hand to him. "Wanna play with us?" He and Sylvia smiled warmly at him.

Peepers slowly accepted the hand, still waiting for something to happen, but when he grasped it and they still contained their smiles his own soggy eye returned the smile too.

"Yes, please."

Wander had seen the kid multiple times now. It was hard not to since the village didn't house any other species like him. A skeleton, a skinless skeleton with glowing, green eyes and small yellow horns coming out from the sides of his head. He was the only skeleton child around. It was hard not to notice him. What Wander didn't understand was *why* he was barely noticing him *now* .

A Skelloid child, according to adults the *only* Skelloid child around. Wander spotted him sitting on the same place every day, just outside the village but not actually passing the village's limit. He took the spot under the trees, hidden in the shadows. His red robes hardly making it easy to find him but the bright white from his bones was enough to let Wander know he was always there.

"Wander?" Peepers asked him, clutching his Cyclops bear to his chest.

"Are you looking at him again?" Sylvia followed his gaze and spotted the skeletal child. Wander nodded. "This is the fourth time you know."

"I can't help it." Wander replied. "He looks so lonely over there."

"Are you going to ask him to play?" Peepers wondered.

Not even answering the Nomad started heading towards the shadows of the trees, walking straight to the skeleton.

"I'll take that as a yes." Sylvia commented and followed after with Peepers right at her heels.

The Skelloid had his back turned to them so he never saw any of the three coming, but the moment he heard one of them speak he spun his head in surprise.

"Hi, I'm Wander." The little orange Nomad sat right in front of him. The Zbornak and Watchpup that followed took up each of his sides. "This is Sylvia and Peepers."

The skeleton looked at them warily, trying to figure out why they were even there. Nobody else had tried talking to him before, why were they starting now?

"So what's your name?" Wander asked, receiving no answer from the shy Skelloid. "Do you have a name?" He nodded at him. "Want to tell us?" No answer.

"Want us to give you one?" Sylvia suggested. "How about Skelly?" He looked offended at her. "That bad, huh?" He didn't seem amused at her attempt of humor.

"We're not trying to make fun of you." Wander told him. "We just want to get to know you. Hey! We're going over to the pond to look for treasure, want to come along? I'm sure we'll have a lot of fun together!" The Skelloid looked at them as if the very idea of inviting him somewhere was beyond his understanding.

Wander jumped up enthusiastically with Sylvia and Peepers mimicking him. He extended an arm down at the skeleton child. "Wanna play with us?"

The other looked at his hand curiously, looked back at him, gave Peepers and Sylvia a once over and dropped his gaze back at the offered hand. Slowly he reached out to grasp it, and successfully made Wander smile beyond his capability.

Without letting go of the skeletal hand he led the three to the pond where he found the shiny stones and shells days ago. Together all four dug near the sand. Wander never missed a beat and caused

layers upon layers of sand to pile up and create mini hills all around. Sylvia wasn't about to get outdone and turned the entire thing to a competition. The kid with the biggest mountain of sand would win.

Peepers was a bit more cautious, his one giant eye limiting his sand throwing in order to avoid a very painful case of 'sand in my eye.' The Skelloid was slower in the digging and searching. While spending his current time with other kids was enjoyable he didn't know how long it would last. The entire thing could only be for a day and then everything would return back to normal, as if it never happened.

Before any of them knew it time had escaped them. The sun rested above their heads, telling them it was time to go home. They were so into the sand competition that none of them found a single treasure to keep.

"Aww, that's a darn shame." Wander said. "We didn't find anything, but we sure had a lot of fun!"

"Yeah, too bad." Sylvia added.

"I really wanted to find treasure though." Peepers hung his head low in disappointment.

Suddenly an idea hit Wander. He was carrying treasure, three treasures to be exact. His mother always said it was better to share with others, especially when those others were friends. He brought out two of the three shiny stones he found on the very pond they were standing on; somehow managing to carry them around with a means even he didn't understand.

"Look what I have." He showed them the green and red stones.

"Oooh, those are beautiful." Peepers commented

"Here you go, you can keep it." Wander offered him the red stone which Peepers accepted hesitantly.

"A-are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. It's a gift to a friend." Right on cue Peepers' red eye

started watering on the spot, causing Wander to smile and turn to the Skelloid child.

"This one is for you." The skeleton looked shockingly at him. They barely know each other and already he was giving him gifts?

"I hope we can play together again tomorrow." Wander told him, still holding the stone for the other to accept. Slowly but surely the other reached out a shaky hand and accepted the gift, but before he pulled the gift back he quietly said "Hater."

"'scuse me?"

"My name is Hater." Hater repeated.

Wander positively grinned after that. "That's a neat name!"

"'bout time." Sylvia crossed her arms.

"Hey, wait." Peepers suddenly said. "What about Sylvia? You didn't give her a stone."

"Actually he did. He gave me a blue stone days before we sent those bullies packing." Sylvia proudly showed off her own stone which somehow she was able to carry around.

"Aww shucks, Syl. You still have my gift." Wander said bashfully.

"Of course I still have your gift. I'm not about to throw my friend's present."

The little Nomad's heart fluttered against his chest. He can't remember a time he'd ever been this happy, and he knew for sure he wasn't about to forget the feeling any time soon.

"But, Wander you don't have a stone." Peepers informed, looking at the stones Wander had given and realizing the Nomad was left out, or at least seemed like it. Wander pulled out the orange stone and showed it to them.

"Don't worry about me, I have a stone too. I found all four here in this exact place." Everyone looked around the pond. "Neat! I found

them here and now I'm giving them to you guys here!" Wander realized. "Start of a new adventure!" He held out his orange stone, shining from the reflection of the sun. Sylvia, Peepers and Hater also held out their own stones with him, forming a small circle in the sky.

"This is all too mushy for me." Sylvia said and stuck her tongue out playfully, smiling and laughing right after. Wander joined in the laughter until he remembered the time of day.

"I better go home now. Mama will be worried about me." Wander turned to head for home, but not before waving goodbye to his friends. "Goodbye! I'll see you tomorrow, friends!"

Chapter 3

"Are you guys sure about this?" Peepers asked as he followed after his friends, walking beyond the village and surely beyond what their parents would have allowed.

"'course we're sure!" Wander answered cheerfully. "Haven't you ever wondered what's out there? Come on! It'll be a great adventure!"

Peepers wasn't convinced, but none the less continued after them, taking up the rear until he jogged a little and caught up with Hater. Wander and Sylvia walking side by side on the front.

"Whatcha think we'll find out there?" Sylvia asked after minutes of walking, their home getting farther and farther away. The land started rising upwards, creating a small hill on one side that blocked whatever view was beyond.

"That's a mystery until we find it!" Wander shouted as he sprinted across. "Race ya! Whoever reaches the top of the hill wins!"

"Oh you're on!" Sylvia shouted after him and sprinted as well, followed by Hater who had some difficult as his robes continued getting caught under his foot.

"Guys! Wait for me!" Peepers cried as he tried his hardest to keep up with the sprinting trio. His short legs didn't give him any justice in distance though, and unlike Wander he didn't have bundles of energy stored in his little body.

"First!" Sylvia danced in victory, followed by Wander who shouted "Second!" and Hater who had Wander shout "Third!" for him. When Peepers finally joined them on top the hills his little eyeball was already full of tears.

"Peepers? Why are you crying?" Wander asked and placed a hand on his small shoulder.

"B-b-because I'm slow! I c-couldn't keep up!"

"Aww, that's nothing to cry about, friend!"

"B-but if I can't keep up I'll be left alone!"

"We would have waited! We'll never leave ya behind, Peepers."

Peepers looked up at the smiling Nomad with his watery eye, and when he saw both Sylvia and Hater had smiled too he knew they agreed with Wander. Peepers nodded at them as he closed his eye and rubbed some of the tears away.

"Enough of this mushy stuff! Look over there." Sylvia pointed across from them to the view of curly and colorful trees that were hidden away moments ago from the hill.

The four kids scanned the area in awe. It was a curly and colorful forest of trees that somehow looked like a candy wonderland. None of the trees had leaves on them, giant trunks and curling branches. Some of the trunks toppled over, bending from old age. Others were barely growing tall, a few no taller than Sylvia or Hater. There was an occasional tree trunk that split in two and somehow leaned in a way to cause the curling branches to form an arch together, and that peculiar tree was closest to a hill of land near them.

"Wow." Wander breathed out. "That is so cool!" He cheered and jumped for emphasis. Peepers, wanting to join in, mimicked his friend's action and leaped to the sky with a cheerful "Cool!" before landing on the ground again, but to his shock he didn't stop when his feet touched the soil.

Both his feet shook briefly before the part he was standing on gave in under him. Peepers landed on his butt before sliding down the extremely steep hill on the other side that all four of them neglected to realize. The Watchpup screamed for his life as the scenery changed from ground, to trees, to sky, and back to ground again. He could hear the others call his name but they were volume out by his own voice.

Finally he landed not-so-softly on the evened out base of the hill,

and the moment he sat up he wailed into tears. Wander, Sylvia and Hater ran to him as fast as they could without meeting the same journey, and once they reached him were by his side instantly. Wander was the first to act, wrapping his tiny arms around the Watchpup in a massive but gentle hug.

"Peepers! Are you alright, friend? Anything hurt? Any scratches?" When Peepers shook his head, unable to answer through his crying, Wander's hug tightened.

Hater was the second to act. Not saying anything he slowly wrapped his arms around the two, the long sleeves of his robes acting as blankets on the two smaller children. Sylvia watched the three for a time, hesitating between scolding Peepers for scaring her like that, despite the fact that it wasn't his fault, or hugging the three and throwing her train of thought that hugs were girly and mushy and she shouldn't do it out the window. But the more she watched them the more she realized that she honestly didn't care if the hug was mushy if it meant showing how relieved she was that her friends were safe without words.

Not giving it a second thought she spread her tiny arms and hugged the remaining, visible part of Peepers in-between Wander and Hater. She made sure to have each arm touching her friends that didn't experience the fall and place the top of her chin/snout on Peepers. Huddled together the four stayed like this until the crying calmed down.

"So, are we still exploring?" Sylvia asked when she pulled away.

Everyone turned to Peepers. It was up to him now if he was well enough to explore, but when the Watchpup shook a bit and hiccupped they knew it was an automatic no right away.

"We'll explore it tomorrow!" Wander answered. "For now let's go back home."

"B-b-but g-guys, we came all this w-way." Peepers tried, feeling extremely guilty for ruining the entire day.

"Adventure can wait. We can try again tomorrow." Wander told him.

Outnumbered, Peepers had no choice but to give in. When all four kids got ready to return back their next challenge stood in their way. The sharp hill was a fair distance to the top and it stretched out on the sides for miles, preventing them from just walking around it. Their only option was to climb it, and because of their small stature the hill looked like a mountain.

"Wow, that's a doozy to climb there." Wander took the first step on the rising mound, placing both hands down and starting to crawl. Some of the soil separated on contact and caused Wander to slide back down multiple times before actually making any progress.

The more he tried to climb the more he began to realize the situation was oddly similar to that of the sinking wet sand. When the four went exploring near the pond the other day the sand nearest to the water was the quickest to sink when they stepped on it. Their feet would always get stuck each time they walked over it, but when they ran across it the sand became sturdy for a quick second before sinking down again. The discovery resulted in them having a race to see who ran the farthest before getting stuck.

The soil didn't sink when they ran fast enough. Maybe the soil won't slip if he climbed fast too?

Wander ended up thinking about it too long and slipped back all the way down the hill, in front of his friends. All of them looked at the hill, thinking of ways on how they could climb it. If Wander couldn't do it, they probably couldn't either.

Deciding to test his little theory Wander got to work. "Hey guys?" All three looked at him, noticing him smiling from having something in mind. "First one to the top wins!" Wander shouted before taking off, or in a better sense crawling off and making distance on the hill.

At first Sylvia, Hater and Peepers didn't understand why Wander wanted to race up the hill when even he himself kept sliding back down, but when they saw the little Nomad actually gain distance without the slipping soil getting in the way they understood.

Sylvia looked at the remaining two and grinned. "Beat you to the top!" She said before sprinting off. She found the soil was much

easier to grab hold of than originally thought. Unlike Wander, who was wearing shoes, Sylvia was barefooted, thus allowing her toes to dig deeper and have a base to step on temporarily.

Hater and Peepers followed soon after she sprinted off. Both of them had similar difficulties like Wander and found it difficult to even take a step before sliding down again. Peepers suffered the worst of it. Because of Hater's somewhat taller structure he could still climb farther even with the soil taking him a few steps back. Peepers didn't have this. No matter how hard he tried he would always end up at the bottom of the hill without a single step up, and after a number of attempts he was starting to get tired.

"G-guys!" He cried. "I c-can't do i-it!"

His friends either didn't hear him or simply ignored him because none of them stopped and they kept getting farther and farther away. Peepers didn't bother calling out to them again, choosing to close his one eye and bury it in his arms. *Sleeping here for the night didn't seem that bad.* He thought.

Lost in thought and near in tears he didn't notice someone came back for him, climbing down and studying the little Watchpup.

"Peepers?" Peepers looked up and came eye to snout with Sylvia, who had her arm extended for him to grab hold of. "If we don't hurry Wander and Hater will beat us."

Looking to her side Peepers spotted Wander holding hands with Hater and helping him climb up, his small energetic body pulling the skeletal child without trouble. Peepers looked back at the hand offered and gratefully accepted it. Sylvia didn't take off like Peepers had expected when their hands made contact. Instead she took the steps slowly, pulling the Watchpup and letting him climb on his own. Each time he slipped she would pull up, lifting him off the ground to prevent any harm done. When the slide was over she gently placed him back down and continued the journey up the hill.

When they finally reached the top Wander and Hater were sitting face to face. Wander had been attempting to teach Hater how to play a very complicated version of patty cake, but Hater wasn't

getting the hang of it. He was still smiling at the silliness despite his unsuccessful attempts.

"Guess you both win." Sylvia said when they reached them.

"Aww shucks, we were still racing? I clean forgot about that." Wander placed a finger on his chin. "Want to call it a draw? We did have a head start after all." Wander gave a quick glance to Hater before turning it to Sylvia and Peepers.

Sylvia gave him a thankful smile. "Draw it is then. How about we try again tomorrow when we come back?"

"It's a plan!" Wander jumped up with enthusiasm. "Let's go home. Still plenty of adventure to discover today!"

Everyone smiled in agreement.

The trip back home was quiet and calm, minus Wander's occasional humming and singing that got everyone to follow the beat and step on the same foot together. On this trip Wander and Hater ended up walking side by side on the front with Sylvia and Peepers behind them.

Peepers walked closer to Sylvia, wanting to express thanks for coming back for him but unable to say it now that the incident was over. He ended up not having to say a word when Sylvia turned to look at him and smiled softly. "Don't worry about it."

And Peepers didn't. After being reassured that he wouldn't be left alone, and proven that his friends would come back for him he hardly ever worried about being left behind. However, worrying about other things like Wander wanting to climb those tall, candy-like trees in the near future was still there and accounted for. He really wasn't looking forward to it.

Chapter 4

Wander, Sylvia, Hater and Peepers were minding their own business and playing a game of chase in the center of the village. Many folk that passed by would stare and point, but never actually attempt to interfere in any way. The kids that would play near the center with their own species would gawk at the four, as if the very idea of talking to others different from them was beyond their belief.

Some of the kids stared in disgust while others in amazement. There was one child that stuck out from all of them. She was from the Zbornak group, she was pink and she was angry. Behind her stood four other Zbornak children, and from the way they stood in a line they looked like they were waiting for orders.

The pink Zbornak finally gained enough courage and made her move. She walked over to the four, face blazing and nostrils snorting. "Sylvia! *What* are you *doing* ?"

The four friends skidded to a stop from their game, their attention now at the Zbornak that called Sylvia out. Sylvia turned and glared at her. "What does it look like I'm doing? I'm playing with my friends!"

The pink child snorted in laughter. " *Friends* ? That's what they are? *Friends* . Only a loser like you would make *friends* with other species."

"Leave me alone! This is none of your business!"

"It *is* my business! You're embarrassing me! First you act like a boy and now you're *friends* with *these* freaks! You *freak* !" The pink Zbornak held nothing back and taunted Sylvia and her friends.

Sylvia wasn't taking the taunting well. Not because the pink one was making fun of her, but because she was making fun of her friends. She looked at them and found Peepers starting to tear up and Hater pulling at his robes in an attempt to hide his skeletal body. Wander didn't seem affected by the name calling, but he was worried about

the whole thing getting out of control.

"Now see here, friend there is no reason for the name calling. If you were getting embarrassed you should have told us. We could've just moved and play somewhere else." Wander tried as he walked closer to the pink Zbornak.

"Don't call me friend you freak!" The pink one suddenly shouted and pushed Wander to the ground when he was near enough.

"Hey! Don't treat Wander like that!" Sylvia shouted back and pushed her down, causing the four Zbornaks behind her to move as she fell between them. "Look, Arabel we weren't doing anything to bother you or your *friends* . You have no reason to come here and cause trouble!" Sylvia glared at her. "You can make fun of me and pick on me, but you do not bully *my* friends!"

The pink Zbornak, now named Arabel, matched glares with Sylvia until she got up and shouted "I'm telling mom!" before running off to an unknown location in the village. Her Zbornak followers ran right behind her.

"Are you okay?" Sylvia asked when she offered a hand for Wander to take.

"Yeah, no harm done." Wander gratefully accepted the hand. "So, is she your…" He started. The Zbornak said *mom* . That can only mean one thing.

Sylvia nodded sourly. "She's my sister. My *step* -sister." She quickly added.

"She must be fun to hang with at home."

Sylvia snorted. "If anything I'm free from her at home. She's always too busy hanging out with my step-mom and doing girly things. When she's not doing anything she tries to pick fights but I just lock myself away in my room or go help my dad instead. She refuses to get near him when he's working. She hates boy things."

"She said she was going to tell her mom. Are you in trouble?" Peepers asked carefully.

She nodded. "Every time I do something to Arabel she tattletales and gets me grounded."

"We're sorry for getting you in trouble!"

"It's not your fault. I pushed her because I wanted to. She was bullying Wander and I wasn't going to let her."

Wander kicked the dirt nervously. "Shucks, Sylvia thanks for that, but now I feel bad. How long will you be in trouble?"

Sylvia shrugged. "I'll find out when I head home. So who's it?" She asked, trying to distract her friends by continuing their earlier game before it was rudely interrupted. The attempt was noticed, but it was also short lived.

Playing again didn't seem right when the knowledge that Sylvia was going to get in trouble was fresh in their minds. The three tried their best to smile, forcing it on their faces sometimes. Sylvia appreciated their attempts, but how could she make them understand that she honestly didn't care if she got in trouble? It wasn't the first time, and it certainly won't be the last. Arabel was spoiled, and any little thing Sylvia did that somehow annoyed her would give her a cause to tell her mother. And the mother would always comply to make her happy.

Either way their attempts didn't last long because the game ended early when an adult, red colored, Zbornak came stomping towards them. Their gaze directed at Sylvia. "Sylvia! You disobedient child get over here right now!"

The four children stopped in their tracks a second time that day. Sylvia groaned when she heard the voice, and with her back turned to the adult she rolled her eyes slightly. "That's my step-mom. I've got to go, guys."

Everyone looked sadly at her. "See you tomorrow, then?" Wander asked.

She nodded slightly "Maybe" before turning away and following after her step-mother.

Without Sylvia and knowing what was happening to her the others couldn't find it in their hearts to continue playing. It didn't feel right. In the end they decided to call it a day and play tomorrow with Sylvia back.

The next day came by but she wasn't there.

They waited for her on the same spot they always waited for each other. They waited and they waited, the sun slowly moving across the sky. They continued waiting, refusing to start without her.

The sun passed the late point, signaling it was time to go home, but they still waited. It got to the point where the sun turned the sky a colorful mix of orange and yellow. When it reached it Wander heard his mother calling him to come home. He passed their agreement time and he knew he was in trouble, but he didn't care. He still wanted to wait for Sylvia, but when his mother called him a second time he had no choice but to leave.

With a heavy heart he said goodbye to Hater and Peepers and walked home. Naturally his mother asked the reason why he was so late and when he explained their situation his mother forgave him. She assured him that Sylvia would return the next day and Wander slept soundly knowing that.

The next day was the same as before. They waited with no appearance from Sylvia. The day was repeated with Wander passing their agreed time. When Wander's mother tried to reassure him again he was skeptical.

After the fourth day Wander couldn't take it anymore, and from the way Hater and Peepers withdrew themselves they couldn't either. "Let's go see what Sylvia is up to!" Wander jumped up on his feet and told his friends.

Peepers joined his side slowly. "But how will we find Sylvia?"

Wander's face dropped momentarily. "Good point. We don't know where she lives." But the smile came back as soon as it left. "Let's make it an adventure! A search and rescue!"

"What are we rescuing her from?"

Wander shrugged. "We have to find her first. Do any of you know where Zbornaks live? Mom told me once that all the folk living in the village are separated based on what they live in."

"Oooh, that makes sense." Peepers said, placing a finger on the bottom of his eyeball and looking like he was thinking. He shook his head in the end. "I never saw where Sylvia went home to. I don't know."

"Hater?" Wander asked.

Hater was looking somewhere in the back direction of the village. Something caught his attention and followed it with his eyes. "We could follow her sister back to their home." He suggested, pointing at the pink Zbornak that just happened to be out and about. She wasn't heading towards the center, quite the opposite, she was heading somewhere in the back where a wall of stone took up a portion of the village.

"Zbornaks live in walls?"

"My dad said Zbornaks live in cave houses." Hater informed them.

"Cool! I wonder how they set up a house in a cave." Peepers wondered, the possibilities running in his mind.

"Gosh, look!" Wander pointed at the pink Zbornak that was now disappearing behind cabin houses. "We need to catch up with her or we won't be able to find Sylvia's house!" Without a moment to lose Wander dashed from the center to the back, leaving Hater and Peepers behind for a second before they followed after.

Wander, with his bundles of energy, managed to spot the Zbornak again but quickly stopped himself from still going and colliding with her. The sudden stop caused a skid on the ground and he quickly jumped behind something to hide from sight. Arabel didn't seem to hear though as she continued walking closer to the sections of stone.

Wander's eyes and mouth widened in amazement at the sight. The

wall was flat and reached an incredible height, separating in ways that created different floors. On every floor there were multiple holes that had wooden doors covering them. Some stones were stacked together to form stairs to the floors that were out of reach. Each floor seemed to dig deeper into the wall, causing a pattern all the way onto the top.

"These houses are so cool!" Wander cheered. He absorbed every single detail he could, and even after Hater and Peepers finally reached him he was still gawking at the architectural marvel.

"Wander? Did you see where she went?" Peepers asked when the Nomad didn't notice their arrival. Wander was still too focused on the scenery to answer so Peepers sneaked a peak instead. He managed to marvel with Wander at the scenery *and* spot the pink Zbornak, who was making her way up a flight of stone stairs.

"There!" He shouted when she disappeared inside one of the cave doors on the second floor. He ran straight to the direction, never taking his eye off the door. Hater followed after him while dragging Wander by the arm at the same time. On the stairs Hater ended up lifting Wander in order to prevent hurting him since the little Nomad was still too distracted.

Once they reached the door Wander somehow snapped out of his gazing and put on a serious face as he knocked on the door. It didn't take long for someone to answer, but to their disappointment it was Arabel that opened the door.

"What are you freaks doing here?" She snarled at them, shocked to see the trio standing at her front door.

Peepers hid behind Wander while Hater retreated a little bit, still managing to stand his ground somehow. Wander was unfazed. "Good afternoon. Is Sylvia home?"

"No. Now go away."

The little Nomad refused to budge. "Well, when will she return home?"

"Never. I said go away!"

"Can we *please* see Sylvia?" He tried again.

"Sylvia doesn't want to hang around with freaks like you! *Go. Away* ." Arabel was about to shut the door on their faces when another voice from deeper inside stopped her.

"Aral, who's at the door?"

"Nobody, dad." She replied and tried to close the door but her dad was already there and spotted the trio of children. He stood a great distance higher than the children with his silver coating shining in contrast with his dark mane.

"And who do we have here?" He asked and eyed the three.

"Good afternoon, sir. I'm Wander." Wander introduced himself and his friends with a small bow. "This is Peepers and Hater."

"Good afternoon. May I ask why the sudden visit?"

"Well, sir we were looking for Sylvia. We haven't seen her for days and wanted to know if she could play."

The adult Zbornak raised an eyebrow. "Oh? You must be Sylvia's *bad* influencing friends then?" He looked to Arabel for the question, not exactly asking, more like stating.

The three didn't exactly know what to say so they remained quiet.

Arabel crossed her arms and looked away, refusing to meet her step-father's stare.

"Arel look at me." He said to her. She didn't at first but when he repeated her name more sternly she had no choice. "Now, tell me. Are these the children you said were a bad influence?" She nodded. "Are they *really* ?" She nodded again.

The father mentally sighed. Just by looking at the three children he could already tell they weren't a bad influence at all. And the little Nomad child was so formal and respective that he *couldn't* believe it.

"They bullied me!" Arabel accused, causing the trio to jump back a little bit.

"Did they?" He looked at the trio. "Did you?"

The three exchanged looks. They didn't know how exactly to answer. She was the one who bullied *them* , or more precise Sylvia, but they didn't want to get Sylvia's sister in trouble and make their relationship worse.

Wander twirled his fingers nervously. "Well, uhm…"

The father noticed their hesitation. Maybe Arabel had some truth in her statement after all, but he wasn't exactly 100 percent sure. *Only one way to find out.*

"Sylvia!" He suddenly shouted, surprising the four children.

A set of footsteps against stone was heard in the distance and when Sylvia appeared she looked shocked to find her friends standing outside the door.

"Guys!" She cheered joyfully before curiosity took its place. "What are you doing here?"

"Sylvia!" The three said together. "We missed you so we came looking." Wander explained.

Sylvia smiled happily at them.

"Syl, I have a question for you." Her father started. "Arabel says these three bullied her that day your mother brought you home." Sylvia glared at her step-sister. "Sylvia, tell me the truth. Did they?"

Sylvia looked at her father, then to her friends and then to her step-sister who gave her a seething glare and then back to her father. He gave her a stern look, not angry or intimidating, but more of a look saying 'The *truth only* .'

She sighed. "No, she bullied *them* ."

"You liar!" Arabel shouted.

"Aral go to your room." Their father ordered. Arabel glared at her sister and her friends before stomping off to the direction of her room.

Sylvia walked closer to her friends, earning a hug from each of them.

"Sylvia! We really missed you. Playing isn't the same without you." Wander said.

"I missed you guys too!"

"Why haven't you gone to see us?" Peepers wondered.

"I'm sorry. I got grounded and can't go outside." Sylvia answered sadly.

"Aww." Wander and Peepers whined.

"Well, they came looking for you, Syl it would be rude if you don't go play with them." Sylvia's father said, smiling at the children.

"Can I, dad?!"

"Sure, just be careful, alright?"

The children cheered happily. "Come on, Sylvia!" Wander shouted and ran down the stairs with Peepers and Hater. Sylvia stayed behind for a bit, curious to ask her father something.

"Dad? You're not mad?"

Her dad looked at her questioningly. "Mad for what?"

"Because they aren't Zbornaks."

He shook his head. "As far as I'm concerned, those children came looking for you. They waited for you to play and were willing to take the blame for something they didn't do. As long as they're there for you I don't care if they're not Zbornaks."

Sylvia hugged her dad's leg. "Thanks, dad!"

He ducked down to hug her back. "No problem, but just between you and me, Nomads and Watchdogs aren't that strong. Keep an eye on them, alright?" He whispered to her.

She nodded and whispered back "Alright" before dashing off and reaching her friends down the stairs.

Her father chuckled as he watched them run off towards the center of the village. "There's a group you don't see every day."

Chapter 5

Another day, another adventure to be had, but something was amiss on this particular one.

Sylvia, Hater and Peepers looked worriedly at Wander. The little Nomad looked shaken since they arrived in the center of the village, but they couldn't put their finger on why.

Wander clutched his unruly hair from his head. He curled his body into a tight ball and looked distantly to something in the distance. His eyes were wide and wild.

He'd been sitting like this for a straight 10 minutes, and Sylvia was really starting to worry. What could have possibly shaken him into this state?

"Wander? Buddy? Are you alright?" She reached out to place a hand on his nearly-unseeable shoulder, but when she made contact he flinched, screamed and jumped in the air. This caused the three to jump back in surprise.

Sylvia stomped her foot down and grabbed Wander by his shoulders, lifting him up from the ground and staring him right in his face. "Wander, you have to talk to us. What's wrong? What's got you so spooked? We won't know until you tell us!"

Wander looked between the three, shaken and upset. "I g-got to, I got to do… got to do. S-something's wrong."

All three looked fearful now. "What? What's wrong?" Sylvia was a bit more forceful. Whatever was causing this must really be bad if it's making him behave this way.

Wander looked hesitant, but he realized sitting around wasn't going to do anything so he finally told them. Lifting a shaky finger he pointed at something across from the center. "Mrs. Coco."

All of them turned to look at a senile, two-legged, palm-haired lady

who was bending over and struggling to collect flowers from the ground. The flowers were scattered all around her, and from the looks of it she was carrying a flower pot and trying to place them inside.

"What about her?" Peepers asked.

"S-she dropped her flowers!" Wander answered in despair.

The three friends relaxed. Sylvia gave him a look of disbelief, still holding him she gently placed him down. "That's it? That's what you're so freaked out about? She dropped her flowers?"

"Did you want those flowers?" Peepers walked closer to him.

Wander shook his head. "No! She needs help!" He started shaking again.

"Well, why don't you go help her?" Sylvia suggested.

"B-but I don't want to leave you guys."

"Let's all go help her then!" Peepers cheered.

"You guys want to help?" Wander looked in disbelief.

"You're our friend, Wander. If you want to help than we'll help you help." Sylvia grabbed his hand and started leading them towards Mrs. Coco.

"Did you think we'd say no?" Peepers asked.

"None of the kids like to help." Wander explained, referring to other Nomad children no doubt, and maybe even some Zbornaks or Watchpups. "I thought maybe you guys didn't either."

"Nothing wrong with helping. Wanna hide and seek afterwards?"

Wander smiled at the Watchpup. "You bet!"

The four friends were a surprise to Mrs. Coco when they arrived, and when they offered to help her pick up her flowers she thought

she was dreaming. Never once had she seen kids willingly help her, and these four showed up with a smile and eagerness to get started.

"My, how lovely. Thank you youngsters for this."

The four friends picked up all the flowers on the ground, humming a tune that turned into a song, thanks to Wander. Mrs. Coco watched in joy, the energy of the children making her feel ten years younger, and when she started to sing along she felt she could run around town.

When they finished collecting all the flowers she couldn't help but give them each hugs. She didn't care if they were children of different species, not even her own kind batted an eyelash to help. "You four are wonderful, simply wonderful." For an old lady she gave monstrous, back-breaking hugs, at least that's what Wander and his friends thought. Still they accepted happily.

"Bye, Mrs. Coco, stay safe!" Wander called after her and waved goodbye.

"Looks like a job well done." Sylvia said. "Now how about that game of hide and seek?"

All of them cheered and were about to sprint off when something stopped them. "Wait guys!" Wander shouted. "Mr. Wilt just dropped his shoes!"

Sure enough, when Wander pointed across and the three friends looked they saw a tall, whiskered, middle-aged man who just dropped a pair of shoes that were hanging from his shoulder. He didn't even realize they fell off.

Wander took the lead and went after him, picking up the shoes when he crossed them. Sylvia, Peepers and Hater followed behind.

"Mr. Wilt!" The tall, skinny figure turned around. "You dropped these, sir." Wander handed him his shoes, which were gladly accepted.

"My, thank you, young man! I don't know what I would have done if I lost these!" Mr. Wilt gave him a pat on his head. His arms were so long that he didn't even need to duck to reach the short child. He

walked away without another word just as the other children arrived.

"Now can we play?" Peepers asked, a bit out of breath.

Not even able to take a step Wander interrupted again. "Wait! Mr. Herriman needs help!"

The three groaned. "Wander." Sylvia whined, but otherwise followed him and helped Mr. Herriman collect carrots from his green batch. Later they collected errands for Mrs. Foster and helped prevent Sir Bloo from stepping on a nail.

The children were the talk of the town, mostly from the elderly, by the time the sun was on the center. Whispers and conversations involved compliments like "Did you see that? Such wonderful children." "They're parents must be very proud." And "They will grow up to be fine lads and lass."

Peepers carefully lifted up a small vase, smaller than his own figure, which was really, *really* small. He followed after Hater, who in turn followed Sylvia, who followed Wander, leading them to the outside of a home where the vases were supposed to go. When Peepers placed his down it marked the end of the last task and their job well done.

Sylvia stretched her arms. "Whoo, who knew helping could be so tiresome."

"Gosh, isn't helping neat?" Wander was still up and ready for more work, it seemed. His bundles of energy really gave him an advantage.

"Can we play now?" Peepers whined and sat on the ground. His feet were sore and his tiny arms felt like jelly.

Much like before they were interrupted, but to their surprise it wasn't Wander who said something, it was someone else entirely.

"Peepers!" An adult Watchdog draped in a black robe and a bit rounded in the center marched to their direction, happy to see the Watchpup and eager to give him hugs. And she didn't hold back on those hugs.

The moment she could she reached down and plucked the little Watchpup in a warm, crushing hug.

"Mom!" Peepers cried in embarrassment. "Mom put me down!"

She obliged and placed the pup down, giggling as he overreacted his attempt at 'dusting' off her mom-cooties. "I'm sorry, sweety, but I was just so happy to see you here. What have you been up to?"

"Playing with my friends." He muttered, still dusting off the cooties.

"Oh? And where are your friends? Won't you introduce me to them?" She searched around for other Watchpups, but was surprised when her son pointed at the Nomad, Zbornak, and Skelloid child.

"Mom, this is Wander, Sylvia and Hater." He pointed at each friend respectfully. "Guys, this is my mom."

"Howdy, madam! It's great to meet you!" Wander waved.

"Ma'am." Sylvia bowed her head respectfully.

"Hi." Hater waved his sleeve-covered hand.

"O-oh, my… you're all…" She looked at each child, their orange fur, their blue skin, their green eyes. It was abnormal, it was strange, it was… "You're all so adorable!" She cheered. "I hope you've all been treating my little Peepers alright. He's so sensitive when it comes to playing outside."

"Mom!"

"Yes we have, ma'am. Peepers is a great friend to have and we're really thankful." Wander said genuinely, a big, broad smile showing on his face.

"That's great to hear. I'm so glad."

"Excuse me, ma'am?" A stranger hopped up to them, that stranger being Mr. Herriman who the four helped a while ago. "Is this your son?" He pointed at the Watchpup.

"Why, yes he is." Peepers' mom answered, a bit suspicious.

"Then you must be a proud mother to have raised such a wonderful son!" Mr. Herriman complimented and bowed.

"What?"

Mr. Herriman elaborated. "Your son and his friends just spent the day helping the folk in the village, more specifically us old folk." He chuckled. "They sang songs and just uplifted our spirits. Why, I feel 20 years younger after spending the day with them. Such wonderful youngsters." He bowed and hopped away, apparently finished from what he wanted to say.

Peepers' mom didn't even get to say thank you and simply shouted it after him. She looked to her son. "Is it true? Did you really spend the day helping the folk in the village?"

Peepers nodded hesitantly. His mother had warned him about talking with strangers.

"Oh, you're simply wonderful! All of you!" She scooped him up and hugged him again. "You spent your time helping those in need! I'm so proud of you."

Peepers struggled to free himself from her grip. "Mom!"

"Having helped the whole day you must be thirsty!" She looked at all of them, minus Peepers who was still struggling, and received nods in agreement. "Come! Come! I just made a fresh batch of berry juice! Come follow me and have a glass!" She walked off with Peepers still in her grip.

His friends didn't need to be told twice and followed after her eagerly. The offer of berry juice was too great to pass, and the chance to see Peepers' house even more.

Turned out the house was a mix of hut and cabin. It had a circular surrounding with hay on the top, but the walls and hay were supported by wood. The walls were sturdy and the hay was merely decoration. Once inside it felt like a regular cabin, warm, cozy and just the right size to house a family of Watchdogs. The place was

empty when they arrived. Not a sign of siblings or father anywhere.

"Come inside! Take a seat, I'll get your glasses out in a jiffy!" Peepers' mom disappeared from the room.

"Neat place, Peepers." Wander commented.

"Thanks." Peepers blushed a little.

"A bit of stone could give this place real color." Sylvia suggested.

"It's a hut! Mom said huts are nothing but hay and twigs." Peepers sounded excited when he explained.

"Cool, I wanna live in a hut!" Wander cheered, making Peepers cheer and both ended up cheering together, which was exactly when Peepers' mom returned and almost melted when she saw the cheering.

"Oh you two, you're going to make me melt to a puddle! Just so cute!" She gushed at Peepers, who looked away in embarrassment and handed them the glasses. "I hope you enjoy!"

And enjoy they did. Peepers was already used to his mom's berry juice, but when Wander, Sylvia and Hater tasted it they couldn't believe their mouths.

Wander looked at the glass in disbelief. "This… is… DELICIOUS!" He shouted a bit too extreme.

"This is really good!" Sylvia added.

"Wonderful." Hater finished.

"Oh, I'm happy to hear it! I have plenty left so you tell me when you want more, and don't hesitate!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Wander swallowed his entire glass in one gulp and quickly asked for another.

Peepers' mom refilled it in seconds, happy to give them more and proud to have them as guest. She looked fondly at the three,

different species friends and gave Peepers a one-armed hug. "I'm so proud of you, sweetheart."

Peepers didn't understand what he did to make her so proud, but he accepted it anyway. "Thanks, mom."

Chapter 6

Wander stared out his window excitingly. He sat on the very same spot on top of the couch where he looked out the grown up window months ago. Back when he didn't have a single friend and everyday seemed like an unpleasant time. He was practically vibrating with his hands twitching and body bouncing. He couldn't sit still, and he had *every right* to be excited.

Today was his birthday. A very special day. A day meant to be celebrated just for him! And unlike previous birthdays today was going to be the best by far. Why? Because he had friends to visit for the birthday party for the very first time in years!

"Honey, you'll end up breaking through the window if you continue to push yourself against it like that." Wander's mom walked in holding a handful of party decorations all hand-picked by Wander himself. Naturally most of the color was orange and blue with a side of yellow. It was always the same three colors every year, but to her surprise this year he added the colors green, a pink mixed with orange and red in the selection. She had a clue the colors were encouraged by his friend's influence for he had never done so before, and now more than ever she was eager to meet them.

Wander pulled his face away from the window, leaving behind a smudge about the size of his head. "But what if they get lost? Or they end up missing the house? Or they don't show up at all." He said sounding a bit worried and lowered his head a bit.

"Did you show them where the house is?" Wander nodded. "Did you show them how to get here?" Another nod. "Then they will be fine, dear. They will find the house and won't get lost searching for it. And if they do we have birthday signs outside." She walked over to him and kissed his forehead. "They know today is a very special day and I'm sure they won't miss it for the world."

Her reassurance made Wander smile. "You really think so, mama?"

She nudged him with her nose. "I know so. Now come on and help

me finish up. The sooner we put up these decorations the sooner they will show up."

Wander jumped off the couch excitedly with an adorable squeal and quickly scooped up some of the decorations threatening to fall from his mother's arms. Together they got to work and put up letters that spelled out 'Happy Birthday' together and covered the tables with colorful, decorative tablecloth. On the table she got to work making goodie bags and set up a stack of silly party hats on the corner. Wander snatched one without her noticing and eagerly put it on. When she finally turned to look at him she had to cover her snort from the funny, and yet equally adoring, image her son made. Wander had misjudged how far to pull the silly hat to make it sit perfectly on the very top of his head and it ended up sliding down and covered his right eye. He played along with it and started making faces and pretended to be a one-eyed candy pirate out to steal the goodie bags.

Wander's mom tried her best and sacrificed her neat hair in order to protect the goodie bags, but it was all in vain. Both mother and son ended up on the floor after a gruesome tickle fight with scattered candy surrounding them and an empty goodie bag to show for it.

She got up, dusted herself and got to work picking up the pieces of candy. Wander started helping her when he finally decided to get up. When he reached out for the last candy a knock came from the door that made him freeze momentarily before becoming giddy all over again.

"They're here!" He shouted excitingly.

"Go get the door, dear while I fix this bag, and fix your hat while you're at it too. Go on, don't be rude and keep them waiting outside."

Wander did just that and practically ran to the door and nearly slammed it against the wall when he pulled it open. The folk standing outside were the very people he was waiting for moments ago.

"Happy Birthday, Wander!" All three cheered together. In their hands they each held a present. Sylvia carried a bag that was about as big

as her. Peepers had a box that he could barely carry and Hater had a small item shaped like an animal and wrapped with paper.

"You guys!" Wander rushed forward and hugged them together. "I'm so glad you came!"

Sylvia looked a bit off. "'Course we came. Why wouldn't we? Today is your special day."

"Did you think we would miss it?" Peepers asked from behind the box. His eye completely hidden.

"Well… I, uh…" Wander didn't know how to answer. If he was truly honest he *did* think they would end up deciding not to show up and miss it. It happened twice before with his fourth and fifth birthday. The Nomad children he thought were his friends promised they would come, but by the end of the day it was obvious they didn't remember.

Thankfully he didn't have to answer when his mom returned to greet their newly arrived guests and her son's friends for the first time. She stopped on her tracks when she got a good look at them and then had to look at them again to make sure she saw what she thought she saw.

A Zbornak, a Watchpup and a Skelloid. *No, that couldn't be right* she thought, but the evidence was right in front of her and were looking at her adorably. A Zbornak, a Watchpup, a Skelloid… and a Nomad.

There had been talk circulating the village about four children, the same race as mentioned before, who were friends and were running around having fun and helping the folks. They had gained a small reputation and a title naming them 'The little helpers.' She always thought it adorable when she heard it and found respect for the parents for raising them with no prejudice on other species.

Now, however, after realizing the possibly that Wander, her beautiful, wonderful son, had been the Nomad child running around with the Zbornak, Watchpup and Skelloid children that respect was quickly changing into… changing into…

Pride.

Suddenly everything made sense.

"Hello there! You must be Wander's little friends. How nice to meet you all." She walked over and gave them a warm smile.

Peepers finally put the box he was carrying down and looked up at her with his one eye. "Hi, Mrs. Wander!"

Wander laughed. "No, you silly! Her name is not Wander. I'm Wander!"

Peepers looked a bit embarrassed, which in turn made Wander's mother laugh.

"It's fine, dear. If you want to be respectful than my name is Fragrance. Mrs. Fragrance." Fragrance finally revealed.

Peepers tried again. "Hi, Mrs. Fragrance!"

"And hi to you too. What are your names?"

"I'm Peepers!" The Watchpup answered with a jump.

"I'm Sylvia, please to meet you." The Zbornak bowed her head a bit, making Fragrance giggle to herself.

"Hater." The Skelloid finished.

"It's a pleasure to meet all of you. Wander has been waiting eagerly to get this day started." Fragrance placed an arm on his shoulder. "Go on then. Play outside. You can leave the presents on the table and I'll call you when dinner is ready and the cake."

Wander squealed and quickly ushered his friends to leave the presents and head outside. For the next few hours the house was surrounded by the sounds of screaming, and laughing children. When dinner was ready those same children ran inside with uncontrolled giggles and hardly got a bite to eat from their insane, hyperactive mood. Fragrance couldn't bring herself to care. Today was Wander's special day and for the first time since he could walk

and talk he was finally enjoying his birthday.

When it was finally time for cake Wander was the first at the table. The cake was grand, at least compared to the children. It covered half the table down to the corners. The cake spelled out "Happy Birthday, Wander" with a couple of yellow stars and a greenish hat. Fragrance didn't know if Wander explained what the hat truly meant to his friends, but all that mattered was that Wander knew and from the way he looked at her she knew he knew.

After a birthday song Wander quickly blew out the eight candles, and after being tempted by Sylvia leaned his head down to the cake for a bite and ended up getting his head pushed all the way through. Everyone was laughing when they caught sight of him, even Fragrance. His face was covered from top fluff to furry chin in cake icing. Very *delicious* cake icing. His face covered with sugar didn't even seem to faze the little nomad. In fact he quiet enjoyed it. After licking his entire face clean Wander just smiled and laughed along with them, and when nobody was looking he swiped some icing on his fingers and smeared Sylvia's, Hater's and Peeper's faces with it. The resulting icing battle was something Fragrance could live without, and after cleaning every inch of their faces (and eyeball) she declared it time for presents.

Like before Wander was the first to sit on the couch and eagerly held his arms out. Sylvia grabbed her present from the table and handed it over. Inside the bag Wander found a beautiful, orange blanket with blue and black smudges. The texture was soft, really soft, almost as soft as his fur. He ran a hand gently over it.

"Gosh, Syl."

Sylvia shrugged. "I saw it and it reminded me of you. Something to keep you cozy and warm during the nights."

Wander gave her a hug. "I love it!"

"Me next!" Peepers cheered and waddled over with his box. Inside the box was a soft and cuddly little Cyclops bear. It's giant, adorable eye and one horn on its head gave the bear a huggable appearance, and Wander did just that.

"He's adorable, Peepers!"

"He's my Cyclops' brother! He will watch over your room and keep baddies away!"

Wander hugged him. "I know he will. Thank you."

Hater was last, and the animal shaped wrapping he gave wander turned out to be a wooden carving of a roaring tiger-elephant creature. Wander looked at every detail presented in the creature closely.

"I made it myself." Hater said.

" *You* made it?" Wander was in awe.

"It's beautiful." Peepers commented.

"Cool." Sylvia looked it over.

"My, you are extremely talented. You made this all by yourself?" Fragrance asked after looking over the work.

All the compliments made Hater blush and duck his head a bit but he still nodded at her question.

"It's amazing! Thank you, Hater!" Wander jumped and hugged Hater. Thanking the three all over again for the wonderful gifts.

"Well now." Fragrance stood and clapped her hands. "Off with you. There's still time to play outside a bit more. I'll start getting this place cleaned up."

The children cheered and ran outside. Fragrance got to work and started packaging away cake individually for the children and separated the goodie bags. Once she placed the presents away she got to work with the leftover food and wondered if the children's parents would like some and if she should pact some for them.

The entire process took longer than she had thought and before she knew it the sun was nearly down. Thinking that Wander was inside and already said bye to his friends she headed for his room and

found the most surprising and by far most adorable sight she had ever laid eyes on. On the carpet of her son's room was Wander, tucked away comfortably with the new blanket given to him by his friend, but Wander wasn't alone. Oh no. Sylvia, Hater and Peepers were also there by his sides, tucked inside the blanket and snoozing away together. Both Wander and Peepers were tucked and cuddled in the middle between Hater and Sylvia.

The sight alone almost brought Fragrance to tears. Quickly she went to retrieve her camera and snapped a picture before it was too late. And after making sure she got a decent number of photos she hid it away and walked closer to the sleeping children. It was close to nighttime now and she wasn't sure if the children's parents were going to come and pick them up. Even if it nearly broke her heart to ruin the beautiful image she had to wake them in order to know how they'll get back home.

She nudged Wander first. "Wander? Sweetheart? Wake up, I need you to help me." Wander cracked open one eye and looked at her. "Do you know if your friends' parents are coming to pick them up?"

Wander looked to be thinking about it before suddenly opening both eyes and jumping up. "You guys! We overslept!"

His cry caused a chain reaction with Peepers jolting and crashing into Sylvia, abruptly waking her and made her jump only to trip over her own feet and land on all three of them. Her snout smacked against Hater's head and gave him a run for his nap.

Fragrance stood a distance away now. She held her stomach with one arm and covered her uncontrolled giggles with the other. To think she was lucky enough to witness such a scene and forever engrave it in her head for future torment. Oh the stories she will tell them when they are older. She couldn't wait!

"Children, are your parents coming for you?" She finally asked when she calmed down long enough.

All three looked outside through Wander's room window. "I told my dad I was going to return back before nightfall." Sylvia answered.

"I told my mom the same thing." Peepers whined. "She doesn't know where this house is."

"Same." Hater finished.

"Seems we're in a pickle." Fragrance thought it over. "Well, come on then. There's still a bit of light but not enough for me to feel comfortable letting you walk alone. I'll take you three home. You'll just have to lead the way."

And lead the way they did. After locking up and making sure she had everything she felt she needed Fragrance allowed the children to decide between who will be dropped out first. Sylvia was elected since her home was the farthest away, followed by Peepers and finally Hater, who refused to say anything about his place.

The walk was relatively quiet. The children exhausted themselves out and sluggishly walked across the village. It got to the point that Fragrance had to pick Wander and Peepers up and carry them. With her hands full Sylvia and Hater had to make do with either holding onto her fur or leaning against her in order to stop themselves from falling headfirst to the ground by sleep.

Somehow they made it to their first destination, Sylvia's home. The stone stairs proved to be a challenge, especially with hands full and trying not to knock the children near her feet down. It proved to be an even bigger challenge when they reached the door. How in the world was she going to knock with both her hands full and children ready to knock out?

Thankfully she was saved when the door was yanked open by a silver adult Zbornak who looked shocked to find them just outside his door, but that shock was quickly replaced with relief when he spotted Sylvia.

"Sylvia! Where on cr- *earth* have you been?!" He quickly scooped her up and hugged her. The sleepy child barely flicked a tail in response.

"Forgive me, it was mostly my fault. She was at my son's birthday party but I lost track of time and they ended up falling asleep."

Fragrance explained with her hands still full.

The Zbornak looked at her and nodded, accepting her reason. "Thank you. You must be Wander's mother."

She nodded. "Yes, my name's Fragrance, nice to meet you."

"The name's Everett. It's nice to finally meet the one responsible for that respectful little Nomad." Everett commented.

"And it's nice to meet the one responsible for that wonderful little Zbornak. She's simply lovely."

Everett puffed his chest out in pride. "I'd shake your hand but it seems you're occupied at the moment."

"Yes, perhaps another time. I still need to drop these two home before their parents worry."

"Then I better let you go. Let us properly meet next time." Everett waved goodbye.

Fragrance nodded. "Until then."

The trip to Peepers house was about the same but took a little longer with the Watchpups sluggish answers. Somehow Fragrance found the right hut with the right wall and right color described by Peepers, and with one foot free she knocked by kicking the door, gently.

The one to open it was a slightly rounded Watchdog with long eyelashes compared to the Watchpup in her arms. She scanned them all with her one eye that stopped when she spotted the sleeping Watchpup.

"Peepers! Oh, you silly pup! You promised to return before sundown and yet here you are sleeping in Wander's mother's arms after undoubtedly losing track of time!" The Watchdog quickly snatched the sleeping Watchpup and cradled him in her arms. "Thank you for bringing him to me…?"

"Fragrance. My name's Fragrance. I'm Wander's mother, as you

have guessed."

"Salteen. Very nice to meet you, and I'm sorry. Usually I jump ahead of myself and end up saying things that make others uncomfortable. It was easy to put the two of you together and figure out you are Wander's mother. He's such a wonderful boy."

"No, no, it's fine. I'm actually impressed at how fast you got it, and how fast you figured out the reasons to why he's late."

"Oh yes, terrible curse being able to piece everything together, figure things out with the smallest bit of detail and remember things that happened 20 years ago down to the detail of the dirt." Salteen sighed pitifully.

Fragrance looked dumbfounded for a second. How in the world was all of that a bad thing? It sounded incredible to her. "I think that's fascinating."

"You say that now. Just wait until I'm out there spouting nonsense about the lifespan of certain plants and the circuits needed to make a nuclear engine." Salteen explained distantly.

"Well… perhaps another time we can get together and talk about such things then?"

"Oh yes! I'm most eager to know the one responsible for the wonderful little Nomad."

"Then I will be off. I still need to drop this guy." Fragrance lifted Hater and tried her best to carry the little Skelloid. The child took up half of her chest and almost reached her hip.

"Do take care then! And don't take insult if his father doesn't say much! He's a wary sort and needs to trust you first!" Salteen said and waved.

Fragrance considered her words and walked on. The last trip of the night was a tad more difficult compared to the first two. Not because of the sluggish walking or slurred words, but because there was hardly any words at all. Hater was downright difficult to get to say anything and the only responses she got was a hand pointing this

way and that.

Hater led them somewhere distant from where the common houses were placed. There was hardly any sign of architect anywhere, only a wide empty spot that lacked houses except for one. A lone house rested a distance away. It was about the same size as her own but was a bit more rundown. The house wasn't creepy per say, but the lack of neighbors and lack of front decorations made it look plain and kind of deserted.

Once in front of the door Fragrance kicked the door similarly to that of Salteen's home. It was only a second later when the door was abruptly yanked open to a tall, sharp figure who looked her over as if their very safety depended on it. Their glowing, green eyes softened a bit when they landed on Hater, and with slow, cautious arms they reached out to take him.

Fragrance cleared her throat. "I'm Fragrance. I'm Wander's mother." She moved the sleeping Nomad a bit to clarify. "Your son went to my son's birthday party and lost track of time. I'm sorry for bringing him so late but I had to make two other stops before this. All four of them ended up falling asleep."

The figure stepped out a bit, making their appearance clearer for her to see. It was a Skelloid. An adult version of Hater almost, but with a tad sharper chin. He was wearing a simple red robe with a hood that was covering his head.

"Thank you."

It took seconds before Fragrance noticed that the figure had said something. "No problem!" She answered too loudly. "Forgive me for bothering you in this late hour."

The Skelloid nodded. "It's fine."

An uncomfortable silence fell on them.

"Wrath."

Fragrance blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"I'm called Wrath."

"Oh! It's very nice to meet you Wrath. You are Hater's father, right? He's such a lovely boy."

Wrath nodded. "Thank you. Your son is great too. Thank you, for looking out for Hater."

Fragrance didn't know if he was saying it to her or to Wander but she accepted it none the less. "I better get going. Got to tuck this little one in."

"It was nice to meet you."

"Pleasure to meet you too." Fragrance bowed a bit in respect and walked off, eager to get back home and just go to sleep.

"Oh you silly boy and your antics." Fragrance kissed her son's head on their way home. "You make me so proud."